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Cuba's Human Rights Abuses Under the UN Spotlight

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Following is a statement by Ambassador Armando Valladares, U.S. Representative to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, before the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs and Human Rights and International Organizations of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Washington, D.C., September 20, 1989.

Last year when I appeared before this body I was able to report to you a significant victory for human rights that we had achieved when the UN Commission for Human Rights decided to conduct an investigation into the Government of Cuba's human rights practices. That decision resulted in the visit to Cuba by a six-member working group which was able to collect first-hand evidence of the sweeping human rights abuses which routinely occur in Cuba.

Following the United Nations' historic decision to conduct a full investigation into Cuban human rights, a number of quite remarkable things occurred. Castro actually seemed prepared to tolerate—in an unofficial manner, of course—the existence of several small, but vocal, human rights committees that were independent of the government. He permitted and cooperated with the visits of international human rights monitors, including the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Catholic Church. He released many of the longest held political prisoners and permitted them to emigrate to the United States. The shark can never be tamed, and Castro has all his teeth, as I will presently make clear. He permitted these things to happen because he was in the United Nations' spotlight and he had no other choice to avoid tarnishing his "progressive" image. But unless the United Nations continues to spotlight Cuba, the system will continue to chew up and spit out those who attempt to change it peacefully from within.

As most of you know, I spent 22 years in various prisons and labor camps in Cuba. I know that international pressure is decisive in swaying Fidel Castro. Following years of quiet diplomacy on my behalf, it was only after a well-publicized campaign involving a number of respected human rights groups and private individuals around the world that I was freed from Castro's grasp. I am living proof that international attention, criticism, and pressure can influence and perhaps change the behavior of dictatorships, even one as entrenched and bloody as Fidel Castro's.

Report on UN Investigation

The agreement by the UN commission to finally look into the many allegations of serious human rights abuses in Cuba was a very hopeful sign that the United Nations was truly capable of carrying out its mandate to improve human rights in any country. The investigative working group was able to receive evidence and testimony directly from individual Cuban citizens who had experienced abuses of their human rights. Two thousand individuals sent written testimony to the working group. The report which this UN working group produced was 400 pages and contained detailed accounts of hundreds of separate incidents of gross human rights violations. It is a truly important document that contains a wealth of proof and first-hand testimony on the situation of human rights in Cuba—the freedom of movement, of privacy, of association—all these rights do not exist. Soviet publications such as *Moscow News* and *Sputnik* are banned from Cuba as subversive. As Jose Marti said, "*Solo la opresion debe temer el ejercicio pleno de las libertades.*" (Only oppressors need fear the full exercise of liberty.)

Despite the weight of this testimony and the observations that the working group members were able to make for themselves during their visit to Cuba, the report contained no conclusions. Nor is this surprising. At the outset of its work, the group had agreed to function by consensus. Although a majority of the group reportedly was in favor of incorporating conclusions, no consensus was reached on what those conclusions should be. Moreover, it is significant that representatives from five geographical regions were able to

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agree on so much. The inclusion of the information that makes up the body of the report could not be denied, and the world can draw its own conclusions. This report does not represent my opinion nor that of the U.S. Government. It is the United Nations that describes Cuba's dismal human rights record.

Although, as I have said, the report was overwhelming in its presentation of thoroughly documented cases of human rights abuses, the commission at its session this year could not agree to continue the mandate of the working group to maintain contacts with the Cuban people and Government. Instead, a less well-defined mandate was given to the Secretary General to establish contact with the Cuban Government and to raise human rights cases which come to the Secretary General's attention. The resolution, which conveyed this mandate, was sponsored by Panama—essentially fronting for Cuba—and had Cuba's support.

We went to this year's session of the UN Human Rights Commission hoping to build on last year's historic success there. We felt that the UN working group's report would furnish ample grounds for continuing to examine Cuba's human rights practices. Continuing to keep the pressure on Castro would be the best guarantee that human rights would continue to improve. But already there were warning signs.

Castro's Harassment Campaign

During the last quarter of 1988, following the United Nations' visit to Cuba, there were several ominous occurrences. In violation of his open pledge to cooperate with the UN investigation, and to allow all Cubans to speak freely without reprisals to the UN team members, Castro's agents conducted a campaign of harassment, beating, and imprisonment aimed against the leaders of Cuba's human rights community, many of whom had been in contact with the United Nations. This campaign actually began while the team was still present in Cuba and continues to date. It has, in fact, intensified during the past few weeks when the heads of several important human rights organizations were rearrested and imprisoned on vague charges.

Those arrested include Tania Diaz Castro, who was set upon and brutally beaten by plainclothed government agents as she was visiting a relative at Combinado del Este Prison last November and then tried and sentenced, all in 1 day, for disturbing the peace. She remains in jail today. Elizardo Sanchez who visited this country 1 year ago and is known to many of you, was arrested in August and, if convicted, faces 4 years in prison on charges of spreading false propaganda. Others have been arrested and jailed on even less credible charges.

These recent developments in Cuba are a tragedy not only because of the individual human suffering involved but because people who had staked their well-being on the United Nations' credibility—who had been encouraged and emboldened by the belief that the United Nations would publicize all attempts by Castro to silence his critics—are now the targets of a renewed and intensified crackdown by Castro. Just as I can attribute improvements in Cuba which occurred when the spotlight was clearly focused upon Cuba, I can attribute this backsliding to Castro's perception that the United Nations has not yet shown that it is fully committed to the cause of improving human rights in his country.

U.S. Support for UN Monitoring Role

I believe that, notwithstanding the fact that we got less than we hoped for at the last session of the commission, the resolution adopted by the commission is strong enough to ensure that Cuba remains a subject of UN scrutiny. For that reason we supported it after stronger language, which we originally had supported, failed on a tie vote.

It is now up to the Secretary General to act upon the mandate given him to follow up on the numerous credible allegations of human rights abuses in Cuba. I am aware that many Cubans living in and outside of Cuba have documented human rights abuses by the Government of Cuba and transmitted them to the United Nations. I hope the Secretary General will carefully review these cases and bring them to the attention of the Cuban authorities for their response. If the Cuban Government fails to respond satisfactorily to the United Nations, the fact of their noncooperation will be further reason to continue the United Nations' involvement.

This is our bottom line—to continue to have international monitoring of the situation of human rights in Cuba and to maintain Cuba on the agenda of the Human Rights Commission. Nor must we be swayed to believing that Castro has turned over a new leaf. Cuba continues to be one of the bleakest outposts of the communist and totalitarian world. At a time when communist leaders in all but a few countries recognize that their dictatorial and repressive system is at fault for catastrophic failures of their economies and political structures, Castro continues to press for reinforcing the Marxist model. He is a throwback—and far from the "progressive" model for Third World nationbuilding as he had been 30 years ago. He is now a dinosaur, blind to his own impending extinction. ■

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